NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 390. Price, Five Cents.

THE MILLIONAIRE'S NEMESIS

OR PAUL ROGERS OATH OF VENGEANCE

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No. 390. NEW YORK, June 18, 1904. Price Five Cents.

THE MILLIONAIRE'S NEMESIS

OR,

Paul Rogers' Oath of Vengeance.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE MURDERER'S ESCAPE.

It lacked but a few moments of the time when the train would pull out of the station on its way to Sing Sing—the train which leaves the Grand Central Station at four o'clock in the afternoon.

A closed carriage was driven hurriedly under the glass canopy which stretches between the station proper and the annex. There were two men on the box—the driver and a special officer in citizen's clothes; and there were two men inside the hack.

One of these latter was also an officer; the other was Paul Rogers, a convicted murderer, now on his way to the prison at Sing Sing, where, when the time should come, he was to meet the fate that had been allotted to him, by passing through the "little door" into the room where that terrible chair is located, in which so many persons are compelled to seat themselves never to rise again. It was toward that chair that Paul Rogers was hurrying.

But fate, and the careful plotting and planning of numerous friends of Paul Rogers, had already determined that he was not, on this particular occasion, to arrive at the selected destination. Fate, assisted and directed somewhat by the aforesaid friends, had arranged a most dramatic rescue, which, by reason of its boldness and originality, was destined to succeed.

And this is how it happened:

When the hack drew up against the curb inside the station, the officer on the box leaped down and opened the door.

As he did so, he made a signal which, although almost imperceptible to many who were spectators of the scene, was yet visible to the police officers who were near, and they gathered closely around the hack.

In the meantime the spectators, many of them ignor-

ant of the identity of the passenger in the hack, but nevertheless attracted by an indefinable feeling that was in the air, suggestive of the presence of a convicted criminal, and many of whom—as it appeared later—who were thoroughly posted regarding that trifling circumstance, gathered closely around the hack, and the two men who presently descended from it.

It was somewhat remarkable how quickly that crowd gathered, seemingly from nowhere, but which, almost in a moment, became absolutely dense.

To the three policemen in uniform and the two officers who were not in uniform, in the center of the crowd, it never occurred that the throng of men who were crushing slowly but surely forward were acting in concert, and upon a perfectly defined schedule.

There was no noise—no violence—no disturbance of any sort—nothing, in fact, to give the officers in charge on the occasion the idea that a rescue was in progress.

Each one of those officers had had experience with rescues before that; each one of them would have known how to meet an emergency of that sort with a front that would have disabled its intentions then and there, had they or any one of them realized that an emergency existed.

And that was the point of the whole rescue.

That was the very thing which rendered it a success.

The very unostentatiousness of it! The utter and entire absence of noise or excitement! The steady and unrelenting pressure which the officers strove so quietly and so vainly to thrust back again! The quiet which the officers themselves maintained, fearing that any noise might reveal the identity of their prisoner!

Remember, it never once occurred to them that a rescue was in progress! Had one of them suspected that, revolvers would have been drawn, clubs would have been in evidence, an alarm would have been sounded and the attempt at rescue would have been defeated almost as soon as it began.

But there was nothing in the action of that crowd which so steadily pressed forward to indicate even that they knew who the prisoner was. There was nothing about the personnel of the crowd to suggest that it w not the ordinary miscellaneous collection of humani which gathers at and departs from the Grand Centra Station a hundred times every day of the year.

There was, in fact, nothing about the incident wh was observable to the officers, which was at all out o the ordinary, save that the crowd was more dense tha usual, and that the men who composed it seemed to b more than ordinarily determined to see for themselves what was going on.

Later, when explanations were demanded, there was really not one that was worthy of the name of explanation that could be offered.

There was the crowd, steadily and relentlessly pressing forward. There were big men—well-dressed men—business men, from their appearance, in the van of the crowd; and in the center of it all there were the two officers with their prisoner, who was handcuffed to one of them, and the three policemen in uniform.

Five officers of the law, surrounded by two hundred and fifty determined rescuers.

Just at the instant when the officers became convinced that assistance was necessary—just at the moment, in fact, when one of them was on the point of calling for it, somebody in the distance, and from a point higher up, as if its owner was so situated that he could overlook the conditions, whistled shrilly and peculiarly.

It was evident that the crowd was awaiting that signal, for with almost the mechanical precision of machinery, it acted.

The five officers were seized as one man might have been—and they were seized by many pairs of hands at once.

It was the same with each of the five, so we need only know the experience of one of them, as he afterward described it at the investigation that was ordered.

"Two hands, bigger than my own, went across my mouth, and the fingers locked together so that I couldn't have opened my jaws to utter a word if my life had depended upon it. My head was pulled back with a jerk by those same two hands, for their owner was directly behind me, and I am willing to swear that he

was a giant, although I did not see him. Then, at the same second, two more hands grabbed me by the throat and squeezed, not hard enough to choke me exactly, but near enough to that to keep my attention fixed for the moment on the desire to get my breath. Then, and also at the same instant, each one of my legs was seized by more hands, and I was lifted off my feet, and laid, face down, on the pavement. Then, a moment later there wasn't a hand touching me, and I leaped to my feet ready for fight, only to find myself facing a crowd of a hundred or more innocent-looking men who were vieing with each other in asking what had happened and offering their assistance.

"Sure, I couldn't arrest the whole crowd of them for attacking me, for I was not certain that a single one of them had been concerned in the attack."

That finished his testimony, and that was, in fact, all that he or anyone of the officers of the law knew about the occurrence—save, perhaps, one other—the officer to whom the prisoner was handcuffed.

His story given at the investigation was almost the same.

"I had two hands over my mouth, two more at my throat, and I don't know how many more at my legs," he said. "I could not call out, and I couldn't do a thing to defend myself. When I got on my feet again the chain between the two nippers had been cut and my prisoner was gone. That's all I know about it. I didn't hear a word said—not one. There wasn't a blow struck. Nobody was hurt that I have heard about. They didn't even choke me hard enough to hurt."

And the fact, so far as Paul Rogers was concerned, was this:

When the crowd became dense around him and the officers to whom he was handcuffed was dragged down beside him, a pair of steel nippers quickly severed the chain between the manacles, and then the manacle itself, that surrounded his own wrist.

He was a free man, and before him there was a niche in the crowd into which he stepped; and as he pressed forward the niche proceeded in front of him and as rapidly closed up behind him, something after the manner in which a ripple will travel across a stretch of smooth water when a pebble has disturbed it.

It is all smooth and clear in front of the ripple, and all smooth and clear behind it, but the ripple goes on continuously and regularly, until it strikes against the shore and disappears.

And so, Paul Rogers went ahead, slowly, continuously and regularly, until he struck against the pavement of Forty-second Street, when he, too, disappeared—was swallowed up in the ebbing and flowing of that sea of humanity which sucks through Forty-second Street, between the hours of four and six o'clock, almost every weekday in the year.

He had disappeared from Forty-second Street before it was known inside the station that a prisoner had escaped. He was gone before it was known on the outskirts of the crowd that had surrounded him that he was there at all.

The death chair at Sing Sing was cheated of its prey—or, at least, the journey to Sing Sing was indefinitely postponed.

Paul Rogers, conspirator, murderer, but more than all, a mystery, had made good his escape and was again at large—and he was at large for a well-defined and dastardly purpose.

A short way out of the city, along the shore of the beautiful Hudson River, there was situated a home which Paul Rogers had sworn to devastate.

There, at a place called Linden Fells, surrounded by wealth and luxury, dwelt a family which Paul Rogers had sworn to exterminate—a family against which he had plotted for many years—a family which, but for the sagacity and daring of Nick Carter, would long ago have gone out of existence through the hellish ingenuity and scheming of this devil in human guise.

The beautiful Mercedes Danton, with her brother Reginald, and her father and mother, dwelt there, and it was against those four, with Nick Carter himself for a fifth, that Paul Rogers had taken an awful oath of vengeance.

How terrible that oath was, how carefully he had considered it and planned for its fulfillment, we are soon to know.

Nick Carter himself was to be told the details of the plots against them, almost at once and in a manner little expected by him.

CHAPTER II.

THE BURGLAR ON THE DOORSTEP.

The incidents of the preceding chapter took place at or soon after four o'clock in the afternoon of a day in September.

During the month of June, last past, a man named Ramon Orizaba, a cousin to the Dantons, already mentioned, was murdered at Linden Fells, and Paul Rogers, who had been at that time acting as valet to Reginald Danton, was the confessed murderer.

He had, at that time, escaped, but later—late in June—was captured by Nick Carter, just at a time when he was on the point of carrying into execution a plot to place his own wife, who was known as Isabel Benton, in the place and possession of the great fortune of Mercedes Danton. And it appeared at the time that there was a distant relationship of blood between the Dantons and Isabel Benton, which had resulted in a strong resemblance existing between the two young women, so that it had been planned that it would not be a difficult matter for Isabel to impersonate Mercedes, provided that her parents and her brother were conveniently out of the way. *

Through the hot summer months Rogers had lain in prison awaiting trial, which, when it came, was speedily consummated.

There was scarcely any defense offered at all, and, indeed, so apathetic had the prisoner appeared to be, that it was thought he had abandoned hope.

The idea that all that time he was lying low for the very purpose of averting suspicion from his real plans never once occurred to anybody. He was not known to have a friend outside the prison, and that this prisoner should possess the coolness and the calculation to permit himself to be tried and convicted of murder and sentenced to the electric chair, without even making the bluff at a defense, while all the time he was arranging for a determined and successful rescue at the very moment when he was to be taken to Sing Sing, was an idea that never entered the heads of anybody connected with the trial or the conviction.

Isabel Benton could not be connected with the murder at all, either before or after the fact, and the charge against her had been so vague that she escaped with a light sentence in the penitentiary—so light was it, in fact, that, having pleaded guilty and been sent away at once after her arrest, she had already served her time, and it so happened that she was liberated from Blackwell's Island on the very day of Rogers' escape from the officers at the Grand Central Station.

Now it must be remembered that Nick Carter never bothered his head about a prisoner after he had turned him over to the proper authorities. He considered his duty to the people and to the community completed when he had captured the criminal he sought, and delivered him up to justice; and hence, after the capture of Rogers and Isabel Benton, he had washed his hands of them entirely, and so thought no more about them save when memory intruded upon his thoughts, or some trivial circumstance brought half forgotten facts to his mind.

After the capture of these two, Mercedes Danton and her brother had gone to Europe, and Reginald had betaken himself to parts unknown to pass away the hot season of the year. Nick Carter himself had accepted an invitation to fish for trout in New Brunswick—and so there were other coincidences connected with the escape of Rogers besides the one of Isabel Benton's liberation from Blackwell's Island.

One of these coincidences was that Nick Carter arrived at the Grand Central Station at nine o'clock the same evening of the escape, having just returned from New Brunswick—and the other was that the steamship *Oceanic* had already passed Fire Island, westward bound, and that when she docked the following morning, among the passengers who came ashore were Mercedes Danton, accompanied by her father and mother.

It was about half-past nine o'clock when Nick Carter reached his house that night, and as he was in the

*See and read Nos. 388 and 389 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, entitled "The Murder at Linden Fells" and "Mercedes Danton's Double."

of ascending the steps to his front door he heard name called from the street, and, turning, observed, mbling toward him, a man who at first glance ap- tred to be a genuine specimen of the genus hobo. He was certainly as repulsive a looking tramp as ck Carter had ever beheld, to judge from his general pearance, and Nick somewhat impatiently asked him hat he wanted.

"I want a word with you, sir, if I may have it," was ie reply. "My name is Tom Morgan. You'll remem- er me best as 'Red' Morgan, I think. The last time ou saw me was when you testified against me in court id the judge sent me away for five years for burglary. m not as handsome now as I was then, Mr. Carter."

"That's a fact, Morgan," smiled Nick. "I knew our voice, of course, when you spoke to me, although ven that has become a little rusty; from lack of use, I uppose; eh? How long have you been out?"

"Three or four months."

"You must have been having a hard time of it, to udge by your looks. Aren't there any cribs left for ou to crack? Out of prison three months and still roke is an unusual circumstance for you, isn't it?"

"Oh, I'm not broke by a long shot, Carter."

"Mr. Carter, if you please, Morgan. I can't permit familiarity from people in your profession, no matter ow much I may happen to admire their skill."

"All right, Mr. Carter. No offense," and the bur- glar laughed. "I'm not broke. This rig I've got on is a disguise. I can look the hobo, and play the part, too, o beat the band, when it happens to be of advantage for me to do so. I picked up the fact that you were out of town and were expected to arrive home yesterday or to-day, and so, as I wanted to catch you as soon as you appeared, and to do that had to hang around the vicinity of your doorstep until you came, I just adopted the obo rig; see?"

"Yes; I see. But what for? Why did you wish to ee me? I should suppose that I would be about the ast person on top of earth whom you would wish to ee."

Morgan grinned.

"Well, Mr. Carter," he said, "ordinarily that is the case; but there happened to be a reason or two why I thought you would appreciate my society just now."

"How is that, Morgan? You haven't turned stool-pigeon since your imprisonment, have you? You are the last crook in the city whom I would pick out for an informer against his kind."

"Well, sir, I'm much obliged to you for that opinion —and it's a correct one, too. Nobody ever accused Red Morgan of being a squealer—bet your life on that. All the same, that is about the size of my present con- tract."

"Do you mean that you have come here to be- tray——"

"Hold on, please. That is a hard word for me to swallow, even though it does amount to a betrayal in one way. But, on the other hand, it isn't a betrayal at all, for the guns I'm going to peach about are no pals of mine and never could be. It isn't my fault that they made a lay for me and wanted me to get on board their machine with them. Can't you take me inside, Mr. Carter? I've got a lot to tell you."

Nick hesitated and Morgan continued:

"These clothes aren't as bad as they look. You know that I'm rather a clean sort of a chap, and this rig is one I fixed up myself. There's a lot about it that looks like filth, but it's really good, clean dirt, gathered from a country roadside—and I won't ask you to let me sit down. I didn't come for that, and I probably won't stay half an hour."

"All right. Come in," replied Nick.

A few moments later he had provided Morgan with a chair, and they were seated together in the reception room.

"Now what is it all about?" asked Nick. "I know you well enough, Morgan, to believe that you would not take the risk of coming to see me unless you had some- thing of importance on your mind. Let's get down to business."

"Well, it is important. I'm sorry, sir, that you did not get home about six hours sooner."

"Indeed! Why?"

"Well, if you had, you could have prevented the whole thing that I have come to warn you about. You

see, when you did not get here soon enough to prevent it, I was for going away and leaving the rest of it to take its own course; but when I thought it over I couldn't do that, for when you came to find it all out later you would say that Red Morgan was a coward, and I've never been called that in my life."

"No," replied Nick. "I would not say that you are a coward, except on the general principle that any man who will steal must be a coward. However, we won't discuss that. What was it that I did not get here soon enough to prevent?"

"The escape of Paul Rogers."

"Eh? What is that? Has Paul Rogers escaped?"

"Well, I didn't see him escape, and I haven't been told that he has escaped, but I wouldn't be afraid to bet a thousand to one that he has."

"When?"

"At four o'clock this afternoon."

"Where?"

"While they were taking him to the train at the Grand Central. I wasn't there, and I haven't heard anything about it since; but the plans were too well laid to have failed, and so you can bank on it that he is at liberty at this moment."

"H'm! And you came here to warn me of it so that I could prevent it? Is that it?"

"That was my original intention; and I didn't expect to tell you any more—then. But now I expect I'll have to do so."

"Tell me first why, when you found out that I would not get here in time to prevent it, you did not give the information to some other person who could have prevented it?"

"For the very simple reason, Mr. Carter, that while there may be a million coppers and police officers higher up on the fence who would keep faith with me in a matter of that kind, I never yet happened to make the acquaintance of any of them. Nick Carter was the only man I wanted to trust, for I knew that Nick Carter would keep his word with me with the same absolute certainty that he would keep faith with the President of the United States."

"That is true, of course. But what do you want me to promise? I may not feel inclined to give pror you know."

"I don't want you to promise anything, save that will forget where you got the information I'm goin give you. Just for the sake of my own personal ings in the matter, I don't care to have it known e that I—well, that I peached."

"I can promise you that nobody will ever get t information from me," replied Nick. "But is that you are going to ask? Aren't you going to say, wh you have told me all, that because you have done m favor, you expect me to be a little light on you the n time my duty requires me to nail you?"

"Not on your life, Mr. Carter. A fair field and favors is all I shall ask or expect at your hands, an know that I'll always get that," replied Morgan.

CHAPTER III.

THE UNFOLDING OF ROGERS' PLOT.

"Mr. Carter," continued Morgan, after a short pau "I suppose it would be a sort of paradox to say th there could be such a thing as a square crook, but there ever was a crook who tried to be on the square far as his business would permit, Tom Morgan is thi chap."

"It is something of a paradox, Red," laughed Nic And then he added, seriously: "Why do you not shal the business and be on the square all round?"

"Too late, sir—too late. There is too much pa and not enough future, in mine.

" 'Though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be wash as white as wool," quoted Nick, solemnly.

"I know all that, sir, and I appreciate your kindne in saying it, too. I know, moreover, that you are jus the man who would hold out a helping hand to a cha like me who made a break to get up onto the brigh and better side of life. But I didn't come here to d cuss that with you, and if you don't mind we wo do it."

"All right, Morgan. Go ahead; only, I would li to add just one word on the present topic before leave it."

'What is that?"

'This: If there should ever come a time when you nt to play square, come straight to me and say so. I promise to believe you—to take your word for it, d to stand for you in the fight that is bound to fol- w."

"Thank you, Mr. Carter. I won't forget; and who nows? There may come a time when I'll call that and of yours."

"Good," said Nick. "I hope there will."

"And now, before I get down to the business of my all here to-night, I want to say a word in explanation f my position."

"Go ahead, Red."

"I told you just now that my principle was a fair ield and no favors. That expression means more with ne than it does with some people."

"I've no doubt of it, Morgan."

"It means, for instance, that when I decide to crack crib somewhere I know that in doing it I am more han likely to get you on my track, and that it is your duty to nail me if you can."

"Exactly."

"Well, if you do nail me, I do not cherish the least sort of hard feeling toward you for doing it. I am a professed enemy to society; you are its guardian. If I do wrong, it is your duty to catch me and send me away if you can—and I respect you rather than hate you for doing your duty, even though I may be the victime of your zeal."

"I believe you, Morgan, although it is rather an unusual view for your class to take."

"It is true in my case; but if I should try, I don't think I could put my finger upon another crook who feels just as I do about it."

"No; I do not think you could."

"Ninety-nine out of a hundred of the crooks who have, sooner or later, felt the weight of your hand, want revenge."

"That is only natural, I suppose."

"Natural or not, it is true. Many a man is engaged this minute in keeping tabs on the days of the week and month by scratching on the walls of their cells, who are only waiting to get out in order to get square with you."

"Sure thing, Red; but I'm not getting nervous about them."

"Oh, I know that, and it isn't what I'm driving at. Let me go on in my own way."

"Correct. Go ahead."

"Some of them want to murder you; some only want to punch you, and—well, there are all sorts of feelings among them, and out of the whole lot it is safe to say that not one out of a thousand would ever take definite shape if there was nobody to direct them."

"Aha! I think I see your point."

"Now, I'll tell the story of my own experience, and you will see exactly what I mean."

"Well?"

"I hadn't been out of prison more than four or five weeks when an old pal of mine came to see me. The first thing he did was to ask questions until he found out that I owed the time I had just been doing up the State to you. Then he asked me to meet some of the gang he was training with, at a place down in East Houston Street. I asked him what the lay was, and he told me that I would find out when I got there—and I did.

"In a few words, the lay had three prongs to it. One of them was for the rescue of a man named Paul Rogers, of whom I had never heard at all at the time. He was sure to be convicted of murder in the first degree, and a rescue was planned to take him away from his guard while he was on his way to Sing Sing.

"I saw no objection to that, inasmuch as we were to be well paid for the job. I did not know, and I do not know now, where the money came from to pay us; I only know that there was plenty of it. There wasn't to be a blow struck—and, in short, the whole plan was so slick and comfortable, and there was such real genius in it that I rather enjoyed the thing, and went into it as much for the fun of it as for the money—although that was a consideration.

"I won't stop to tell you about the plan now, for you will hear all about it in the morning. It is one of the things that can happen once, easily, and because of the

very simplicity of it, can never occur again. I haven't been told yet whether it succeeded or not, but I am sure it did, it was so slick.

"Well—things went along swimmingly until there came a new deal, all in the same game. I have told you there were three deals. The second one was a play against Nick Carter.

"I want you to understand in the beginning, that there wasn't a man in that outfit who had not suffered at some time or other, at your hands. There wasn't a man there who had not cried out from behind prison walls for vengeance against you. There wasn't one who did not grasp eagerly at the thought of it—and right there, Mr. Carter, was where I bolted."

"Do you mean that you defended me there among them?"

"Well, I wasn't quite such a blooming fool as that, you know. Such a thing wouldn't have done you any good, and it would have done me a lot of harm. No; I just kept my mouth shut and told them that I'd carry out the program I'd enlisted for, and that I'd see them later about the rest of it.

"Now, I told you at the start that I didn't come here to do any peaching on my pals, and so you must not expect me to tell you any names. I couldn't do that. Nor will I tell you all of the plot; but I will tell you this much:

"The main guy behind the whole outfit is that same Paul Rogers, and it would appear that he is some pumpkins in his own country, wherever that may be—England or France; I don't know which. He's either got a big wad of shekels, or he knows where to find one when he needs it.

"Now, Paul Rogers has got a wife, whom you also sent up. She was to get out of the pen to-day, her time being greatly shortened for good behavior, and all that. Maybe you know who she is, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes; Isabel Benton, or Rogers; it is the same thing."

"That's right. Those are the only names I shall mention. You'll have to guess the others as they appear."

"I think I can do that."

"All right. I hope you can. Please take notice that I am telling you only what I have picked up at or meetings of that mob, and I don't vouch for the t or the correctness of any of it. I never heard of at of the parties except yourself, until I trained with in crew I'm speaking about." I

"Go on. I understand." e

"Up the river somewhere, not as far as Sing-tw I imagine, there is a beautiful country place where so people live whom you know. There is a very beauti young lady in the family, and somehow the notion h gotten out among the crooks that you are very frienc with that family and especially with the daughter. Tl Isabel Benton and the daughter are as alike as tv peas, it is said, and there was a plot to place Isabel her place, once upon a time, which plot failed." n

"I know all about that," said Nick.

"All the better if you do. The father of the yout lady is a multi-millionaire. There is a brother, als who is what the boys call a smart fool. You kno what that means. He is money blind. He has abi ties and won't use them. He is smart, but too la to use his head. Gritty, but too easy to fight. A goc fellow, but too much taken up with killing time to d anything else. A young chap, I imagine, who hasn been woke up yet, so to speak—a sort of an electr motor without any current to speak of."

Nick laughed aloud. ic

"That is a first-class description of a person whor you never saw," he said. al

"Well, it is the impression I received from what heard about him. That boy—he's about twenty-four I think—is very much in the way of Paul Rogers, an h. Paul Rogers proposes to put him out of it. The ol man is still more so, and Paul Rogers has sworn away his life. The old lady—the mother—is a sort of super- numerary, but when the time comes she is billed to shuffle off in some way or other—I don't know what."

"And the young lady?" asked Nick.

"I was getting down to her. I couldn't find out much about the plot against her, save that the woman Isabel is to take her place, somehow and somewhere and the thing is to be done so slick that nobody will suspect that it is done."

Do you mean that you do not know the particulars, that you are keeping them back?"

I mean that I don't know them, only to the extent that if you don't keep a mighty close watch over her she will disappear off the face of the earth in such a way that you won't have any idea that she is gone until it is too late to help her; and that because you are the key factor in the plan which can interfere with their success, you are to be gotten rid of in the most approved fashion—and that, Mr. Carter, is what I came here to tell you about. Paul Rogers was set free this afternoon, and I happen to know that there is a bet on, with the odds against you, that you will be a dead one inside of forty-eight hours after he is at liberty."

"In that case, Morgan," said Nick, coolly, "you won't mind answering me a few questions, will you?"

"I don't think so. Ask 'em, and I'll tell you."

CHAPTER IV.

BURGLAR MORGAN'S BIGGEST HAUL.

"Morgan," said Nick, "have you any information which can lead you to form an opinion or express a belief concerning the method which Paul Rogers intends to employ in removing me from the pale of existence?"

Morgan grinned.

"Would you mind saying that all over again, and going it slow?" he asked. "But never mind. I'll try to reply to it in my own way.

"You see, Mr. Carter, the fact is that this thing is much more serious than you imagine. If it hadn't been, you can bet your life that I wouldn't have spent the best part of two days, rigged out in these togs, loafing out there in the street and holding out my hand for alms in order to keep up the character while I was waiting for you."

"I believe you, Morgan."

"I tell you, it is a serious matter; so serious that I take it a duty which I owed to my own manhood, to warn you. I'm a burglar, Mr. Carter, but I've kept one of my manhood tucked away in a dark corner where I can call upon it for use when it is needed. This was a case where I felt that it would come into play."

"Just why did you feel that way?"

"Because I think they mean business. Because this gang, which has been formed at the suggestion of Rogers, under his orders and with his money, is composed of between fifty and sixty members, and—here is the point—because there is a separate and distinct method for getting rid of you, for each and every member of the gang."

"They propose to attack me in fifty or sixty different ways, then? Is that it?"

"That's about the size of it."

"How do you know that?"

"Simply by the methods that were employed in my own particular case."

"Can you tell me about that?"

"That's what I came here to tell you."

"Then let me hear it."

"Remember, please, that I am relating only my own experience."

"Sure."

"I don't know a thing about what was said to the others. I can only surmise, because of what was said to me."

"Yes."

"I was called into a room where the gun who acts as the main guy in the absence of the real chief, Rogers, received us, one by one, and each one alone. I don't know just how far down the list my name was, but I was pretty close to the last that was called in. You see, the outfit hasn't got on to my curves yet. They don't know whether they can quite trust me or not."

"I see. Go on."

"Well, when he got me in there he looked me over with a sort of quizzical expression which I didn't like, and presently I told him so. 'If you're looking for a continuous performance show,' I said to him, 'it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to mosey down to Keith's. I'm not supplying any star attractions just now.'

"I won't try to quote him; I'll just tell what happened. He told me that he thought I had been pretty

well informed as to the purpose of the organization, but for my especial benefit he'd go over the ground a little. Then he opened with an account of the desire to liberate Rogers and expatiated on all that Rogers could and would do for the gang when once he was at liberty; and then he said this:

"'Primarily, this is a play for a hundred million dollars' haul—the biggest that was ever made in the open in the history of the world. There have been hauls quite as big made by a class of men who pose as philanthropists, but there was never such a one by thieves pure and simple. This is a play for a hundred millions, and it's dead easy if we follow the lead of Paul Rogers without question. In order to make it a success, there are three men and two women to be put out of existence.'

"I stopped him right there with the remark that I would not consent to take part in one murder for a billion, to say nothing of a million. That I wouldn't even consent to be an accessory, and that if he had anything of that kind on the paper he had better count me out of it on the start, before he told me any more about their plans.

"'Well,' said he, 'we have counted you out of that. Your friends who brought you here told us that much on the start; but there is one thing which we want you to do which will make you solid with the gang, and that is to help us to get rid of the detective, Nick Carter.'

"Then he reminded me that I had been up the State doing a term of five years because you had sent me there, and he told me that every member of the gang had some complaint to make against you and some grudge to make good. He said the whole bunch had sworn away your life, one by one, each in his own particular way, and that he wanted to find out just what my method would be.

"That was when I got wise, Mr. Carter. I figured around a little so as to see his hand, if possible, only I didn't succeed in seeing much, for all that. But I gave him the bluff that a man who handed out a proposition like he wanted me to do was a fool to start with. That if I made up my mind to put Nick Carter or anybody else to sleep, I certainly wouldn't start in by giving hand away before I made a play. Nit.

"'I've thought a good deal about Nick Carter sin I've been recuperating up the river,' I said to him, 'b I'm not going to put you wise about those thinks. N I know the game,' I said, 'and all I want is to be l alone to play my hand in my own fashion. If I shou want any help, I'll call on you, but I don't think I sh need any.'

"Well, he was satisfied. That ended our convers tion on that topic, so you see I don't really know darn much after all—only by implication."

"And by implication, will you tell me just what y make out the whole game to be?" asked Nick.

"Sure thing. By implication I make out this: Th old Peter Danton will begin, before long, to act s of queer. His friends and relatives won't know wh is the matter with him until it suddenly dawns upo them that he has a sort of softening of the brain. suppose there is a drug that will produce that effect anyhow, that is the racket. After he has had softenin of the brain for a while, he'll die—quite sudden. I'l the meantime, of course, the youngster will have suc ceeded his father. Now, the youngster has a decide weakness for good-looking women, and he is to be lure into a place where a row will be started and in the *mêlé* he will get a rap on the head, which will settle his hash In the meantime the old lady is to be cared for by trained nurse, or a maid, or somebody who is to be int troduced into the house through the instrumentality of Rogers. She has got a year or two, perhaps more to live. In short, she can live as long as she is of an use to the conspirators, for Rogers proposes to forc the world to recognize the substituted heiress for th real one, through the mother. Catch on?"

"Not quite. State it."

"Well, if the old lady is kept alive, but in the mean time her brain is sufficiently clouded so that she does not know the difference between Isabel Benton and her own daughter, and if it is Isabel Benton instead of her own daughter who lives with her the last two or three years of her life, it will be pretty hard to convince the

I after that that the young woman is not the real
ighter of the house; don't you think so?"
"es; I do think so."
Well, that's the game. By implication, remember.
built all this up by the operation which you detect-
ives call deduction."
he burglar stopped abruptly and rose to his feet.
That, Mr. Carter," he said, "is all that I have got
y; and now, if you don't mind, I will slip back into
own world again."
Morgan," said Nick, rising also, "I wish you would
ee my your mind to remain on this side of the divid-
line between those two worlds."
The burglar shook his head.
No," he replied. "It's no use. I can't. I wouldn't
e along the respectable highways of life."
There is a mighty good man in you, Morgan, if you
ould only consent to let him get on top."
"He's been the under dog too long a time for that,
"
It is never too late."
Pish! Don't preach."
I'm not preaching. Here!"
ick held out his right hand, and Morgan gazed at
blankly for a moment and then into the detective's
again.
Well? What about it?" he asked, roughly.
I want to shake hands with you, Morgan," said
ck. "I want to shake hands with the man who came
my house and who is on the point of going out of
ow—the real man, you know."
Nit!" said Morgan. "Your hand is an honest hand;
ne is mine. They are no more fit to mate together
an a negro and a white. Nit. I'm obliged to you
the same. Good-night."
"Wait, Morgan."
"Well?"
"I am a fairly good reader of character."
"I suppose you are. What of it?"
"I want to tell me just why you have taken all
trouble to save Mercedes Danton from the con-
racy which overshadows her life—for I know that
you came here for that purpose and not for the one you have given—to warn me."

"Tell me why you think that," said Morgan, hoarsely.

"I don't think it; I know it. I knew it by the sound of your voice and by the look in your eyes when you spoke of her."

"All right, I'll tell you, and that will end our conversation for the day. Once upon a time I worked six months on plans and preparations to rob Linden Fells. That was six years ago, when Mercedes Danton was only a girl of thirteen or fourteen, I think. My plans worked all right and I had the whole layout ready to my hand—I would have got away with a cool forty thousand, sure; but—well, that little girl woke up and sat up in her bed when I entered her room. It was a clear night and the moon was full. It shone straight in at the windows of her room and upon her white, frightened face—no, not frightened, just startled. I stood a little back in the shadow, but she was in the full light, and there wasn't shadow enough so but what she saw me very plainly."

He paused, and Nick waited silently for him to continue.

"Just a year before that time, Mr. Carter, I had gone home to see my own people—my father, mother and sister. They thought I was dead, and they think so still, for I didn't put them wise. I sneaked into the house just the same as if I was going to rob it, knowing well that the old man would put a bullet through me if he discovered me there; but I had a good look at him and at my mother, asleep in their bed, and then I went upstairs to see my sister in the same way. I have always been told that children sleep soundly, and I had no idea that I would disturb her, so I went into the room and stood beside the bed, looking down at her."

Again he paused, and again Nick waited without speaking.

"It was just that same sort of a moonlight night, Mr. Carter, and while I stood there, looking down upon my sister, she opened her eyes and raised herself in the bed, just as I have said that Mercedes Danton did.

"She looked startled, too; not a whit frightened. I was the one who was frightened.

"As I took a step backward, she held out her arms toward me and spoke my name.

"'You have come back,' she said.

"I did not speak, Mr. Carter. I didn't let the sound of my voice disturb the quiet and peace of that room; but I stooped down and touched my lips to her forehead, and then I turned away and fled out into the night as if I was pursued. I know that my sister has never told a soul that she saw me that night."

"Well?" said Nick.

"Well," repeated Morgan, "when I stood at the bedside of Mercedes Danton, who was the same age as my sister, and she rose up and faced me in just the same way, I—I——"

"You kissed her on the forehead and fled in precisely the same manner," interrupted the detective, slowly and impressively. And the burglar, in a burst of vehemence, replied:

"By Heaven, I did that very thing, and it was the biggest haul I ever made in my life."

Without another word he wheeled on his heel and went out of the house.

CHAPTER V.

GETTING IN ONE DEAL AHEAD.

When the detective was left alone he sat for many moments turning over in his mind the story he had just heard, and in doing so he recalled a circumstance which had been dormant in his recollection for a long time.

He remembered an occasion once before, in the history of the Danton family, when Mercedes' maid, a certain Sarah Kearney, had been interviewed by him in that same room, and he recalled the fact that he had accused her at the time of keeping back a part of her story.

The circumstances which had followed upon that occasion had developed so rapidly that he had not found it necessary to question her further, but now, in the light of certain ideas that had come to him through the story told to him by Tom Morgan, he believed that he could make a shrewd guess as to what it was she had refrained from telling at that time.

By the time he had finished his cogitations it was midnight, but he had determined upon the course he intended to pursue.

He turned off the lights and ascended to his own room, where he found his assistants, who were waiting to welcome him home.

"I shall have use for all three of you in the morning," he said. "I want all of you to remain in the house to-morrow until you hear from me, and then report when, where and how I shall direct, with the least possible delay. Do you happen to know, Chick, if any of the Danton's are in town?"

"No; they are not. The *Oceanic* has passed Fire Island, and Miss Mercedes, with her father and mother are passengers. She will dock at six in the morning."

"Good. Where is Reginald Danton?"

"I don't know."

"Well, it is more than likely that he will be home soon after the others arrive, so it is safe to suppose that he will show up some time to-morrow, also. I don't suppose that it occurred to you to keep tabs on the fact that Isabel Benton was liberated from the island to-day, did it?"

"No."

"Well, I let it slip my mind, also—and we haven't any of us an idea where her trail might be struck. We'll have to let her slide for the present. On second thought, my lads, I think, instead of asking you all to stay in to-morrow morning, I will ask that each of you make it a point to be on the pier when the *Oceanic* docks in the morning. You may select your own disguises so long as they are good ones. I only wish you to be there. If there is anything to do, I will tell you what it is when the time comes. The main point is to keep a watchful eye over the Danton's—father, mother and daughter, and to keep particular tabs upon everybody who addresses them or approaches them in any way. We are doing this, too, without their knowledge or consent. Now, good-night. I'll see you at the pier."

But Nick Carter did not go to bed when he bade his assistants good-night.

As soon as they had left the room he hurried with a

ed into one of his favorite disguises—that of a re-spectable, well-to-do farmer, who was, nevertheless, so far as appearances went, thoroughly unaccustomed to the ways and manners of the city, and who carried with him an accentuated type of the peculiarities of speech and motion of a man whose life has been bounded by stone walls and rail fences.

As soon as he was dressed he hurriedly left the house, hastened to the elevated station, and in a surprisingly short time arrived at South Ferry.

He knew, without having to inquire, where he would be most likely to find a tugboat with steam up, at that hour in the morning, for it was then close upon two o'clock, and, without loss of time, he presented himself to the sleepy captain, who was dozing in his pilot house.

"Say, yew," he said; and the captain started into wakefulness. "Dew yew happen to know anything about a steamboat named the *Oceanic*, hey?"

"She ain't no steamboat," replied the captain. "She's a tugboat, same as this, only bigger."

"More'n ten times es big, ain't she?" asked Nick.

"Ay, ay; more than twenty."

"Well, that air is th' Holstein heifer I'm a-lookin' for."

"She is, eh? What do you want of her? She ain't no threshing machine. She couldn't pull a plow or break a three-year-old steer."

"Right you be, mister; right you be. She's most broke me, just the same. Say!"

"Well?"

"Do yew happen to know where she is?"

"Ay, ay. Down at Quarantine."

"Where's that?"

"Down the bay."

"Far?"

"Not very."

"How much'll yew take to git me there, hey?"

"What! Take you down on the tug?"

"Yep. That's what I said."

"More'n you've got in your clothes."

"Mebby so. How much?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Whe-e-w! Jeehosephat! Say, I'll give you twenty-five."

"You're on."

"Hey?"

"You're on."

"No I ain't neither."

"Well, get on then. I'll take you there for the twenty-five, only I want to see the color of it before I cast off."

"Yew jest wait," said Nick.

Then, deliberately he seated himself on a box on the pier, and, after removing one of his boots, took from the leg of it a roll of bills as big as his wrist.

"That's where I carry it so's the sharks won't get onto my money," he said, confidentially, while he counted off one and two-dollar bills until he had enough to make up the sum of twenty-five dollars. "There yew be, capting. Now, how long will it take yew tew git me down there?"

"About three-quarters of an hour."

"All right. I'll take a leetle nap. When yew git there, yew jest give this here letter over the side and say that it is to be delivered to the—now, who in blazes did he say to give the letter to? Blest ef I ain't clean forgot."

"Maybe it was the officer of the deck."

"That's it. The officer of the deck is the feller. I wasn't told whether he was the right bower, 'r left bower, 'r only a king 'r a queen,' 'r a common no account jack. Haw! haw! haw! That's a joke, capting, an' here's a good cigar to pay yew for listenin' to it so patiently. When you give that letter to the officer of the deck, yew kin jest call me from my beauty sleep ef yew don't mind."

The detective was sleepy as a matter of fact. He had just come down from the pure and bracing air of New Brunswick, and he had traveled all day in the cars, so that slumber was not long in coming to him, and he knew nothing more until the rough hands of the captain fell upon his shoulders.

Presently the letter was sent over the side, and then, after a wait of several moments, an officer appeared at the rail and called to the captain of the tugboat:

"Let the gentleman come aboard," he said; whereupon the tugboat captain remarked, in an undertone to himself:

"Well, I'm——"

The last word could not be heard distinctly, but it was evidently intended to express surprise that such an out-and-out hayseed as his passenger should be received at all on board the great ship, and, particularly, that he should be referred to with so much respect. He could not know, of course, that the letter addressed to the captain was signed by Nick Carter, and was couched in such terms that the captain did not delay an instant in sending for the great detective.

"Here is where I get in one deal ahead of the conspirators," said Nick to himself, as he mounted over the side of the ship.

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER'S LITTLE COUNTERPLOT.

Nick Carter recalled vividly his first encounter with Mercedes Danton. He remembered that it had been in the early morning and among the roses at Linden Fells; and he remembered also that he had learned in other ways that she was fond of rising early in the morning, and upon this habit he had calculated to afford him an opportunity for an interview with her before her father and mother should appear on the deck of the steamer.

Indeed, he argued that it was extremely doubtful if they appeared at all before the ship was safely docked at her pier, and so there would be the time occupied in traversing the distance from quarantine, during which he could perfect his plans for the future.

It may seem strange to the reader that he should have adopted the disguise he did, in order to see and talk with Mercedes Danton, but there was a distinct method even in that move. He had no desire to conceal his identity from the young lady herself, although for the present and for reasons that were perfectly obvious to himself, he did not care, as yet, that either old Peter Danton or his wife should be made aware that Nick Carter was meddling in their affairs.

Nick had taken the conduct of the case on his shoulders entirely because of his own wish to do so, and was, therefore, acting in a manner which might be deemed officious by the old man, who was cranky and difficult to deal with at the best.

The detective knew that the financier would pooh-pooh any idea that a conspiracy had been organized against the peace of his family. If he had been told that there was a conspiracy against his bank accounts, he would have believed the report without question, on the principle that it would be an act of wisdom to guard against such a contingency in any event; but a conspiracy against the happiness and peace of his family, or even against his own life, unless it were formed somewhere in the Street and aimed in reality at one of his deals, he would refuse to comprehend or believe.

But with Mercedes it was different.

She had already been through one experience of the kind, and had promised, upon Nick's advice, to keep the matter a secret from her father and mother. Hence, while she was in a measure prepared for what Nick had to impart to her, her father and mother were not.

And there was another reason why the detective believed it wise to disguise himself as effectually as possible.

He had no doubt—if the story told to him by Tom Morgan was true—that there could be emissaries of Paul Rogers at the pier when the ship was docked, for he reasoned that they would not waste time in beginning their operations.

He naturally did not wish to have any of these agents of the murderer-conspirator, recognize him nor suspect that he was present, and he most certainly did desire to see without himself being seen.

Mercedes did not depart from her usual custom on that particular morning.

Soon after the appearance of dawn in the east, and sometime before the sun was up, she appeared on the deck, and as soon as she did so, the captain, acting upon Nick's request, approached her and said a few words to her in a low tone.

Almost immediately thereafter she crossed the deck to the spot where Nick was standing leaning against

the rail, and in a position he had selected so that they would be sufficiently apart from other passengers who might appear on the deck. He did not care to be overheard in what he had to say.

"The captain told me that you wished to speak with me," she said, in a low tone. "He said that you had something of importance to communicate to me. Please tell me who you are, sir, for I do not know you."

"Don't you recognize my voice?" asked Nick, smiling, and speaking in his natural tones.

Mercedes started back with a little cry of pleased surprise, and then again looked at him doubtfully.

"Sure," she said, "you are not—no, you cannot be—Mr. Carter."

"Nick Carter; no other; and wholly at your service," he replied.

"Why have you come here in this disguise? Has anything happened to my brother?"

"Oh, no. I think not. At least, nothing of which I am informed. I have come to meet you hidden behind a disguise, because I had good reasons for desiring that you should be the only person aboard this ship—aside from the captain, of course—who would know me."

"But why?"

"First tell me that you are glad to see me."

She smiled brightly at him, and then said, demurely:

"But I do not see you. I see only a man who is past fifty, who looks as if he had just come in from feeding the stock and milking. I don't call that seeing you, because it is not in the least like you."

"At least you hear me," said Nick.

"Well, I'm not so sure of that, either. Your appearance is so at variance with my conception of the manner of your meeting me——"

"Ah!" said Nick. "Then you did expect me to meet you?"

She bit her lips in momentary vexation, and then said, with a smile:

"Certainly I expected to meet you somewhere, at some time, again."

"All right," replied Nick. "We will let it go at that. But in the meantime, please remember this fact: If you cannot see me, I can see you quite plainly, and——"

"And, of course, you are glad to see me. Let it go at that, Mr. Carter."

"All right," he said, again. "Now to business."

"Is there business?"

"Yes; serious business. Paul Rogers has escaped from prison, and Isabel Benton has been released from prison. Both of those interesting events took place yesterday."

"Indeed! Well, Mr. Carter, have I anything to fear from them? Is that why you are here?"

"Yes; that is why I am here. I will not say that you have anything to fear, because it is not in you to fear things—is it?"

"Not especially, I think."

"But you have much to guard against—much to make you watchful—much to keep you on the alert lest your enemies again find an opportunity to make trouble for you, and I fear that they are contemplating a renewal of their machinations."

"And that is why you are here?"

"That is why I am here."

"It seems too bad that we have to meet a repetition of all that trouble, is it not?"

"Yes; and I want to arrange so that there will be no possibility of a third effort on their part, after we have headed them off on this one. I have made up my mind that there is only one way to accomplish that thoroughly, and at the same time to be sure that I am affording you, as well as the other members of your family, all the protection possible, and so I have come here to-day to make a strange request of you."

"Say, rather, a command," she said, brightly, "for I already see that you will insist upon it."

"Very well; put it that way. Is it true that you have taken the cares of the conduct of your household equally from the shoulders of your father and mother? In short, that you are the one who is consulted when there is any change to be made in the personnel of your service at home?"

"Quite so. My father never did bother with the

home part of his existence, and my mother leaves it all to me."

"How do you like your present butler?"

"I am afraid that I do not understand."

"That's easy. I want you to fire him and give me the job."

"Mr. Carter, I——"

"Well, you need not fire him; just give him a vacation. Let him go home and see his parents, or something like that. I want to fill his place. Don't you understand?"

"I don't think I do understand."

"I want to become, for a time, a member of your household, and to be your butler seems the only available plan that is worthy of adoption. I want to watch over you, and to be your butler. I'll wager that this is the first time in your life when a confessed admirer has offered to become your butler, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied, coolly, "and it is also the first time in my life when I have felt it my duty to grant what one of them has asked. You shall be my butler, Mr. Carter. Could I say more?"

"Good," said Nick, chuckling audibly. "You will have no trouble in sending old Simmons away on a vacation for a time. Now, I want you also to engage a new stable boy."

"You are not expecting to serve in both capacities, are you?" she asked.

"Oh, no. I have a young friend who is sometimes handy to have about. I want him there."

"Consider the new stable boy engaged. I will give directions about him as soon as I reach home."

"Excellent. You can let it be supposed that he came over on the same ship, if you care to do so. I'll guarantee that he will be sufficiently Irish to fool the best of them."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes; one more. I want to put one more man in your house. Where shall I put him?"

"Bless me! Are you going to fill Linden Fells with men?"

"Not quite. Only three. I want another place inside the house for my assistant, Chick."

"How would he like to serve as valet?"

"Valet to whom?"

"My father. We always keep a valet for him, and he never in the world knows that he has one, for if there is a commodity in the world for which he hasn't a particle of use, it is a valet; so you see the position is a sinecure; perhaps your assistant would like it—or, perhaps, you would prefer it to the somewhat arduous one of butler."

"No, thank you. I'll stick to the butler."

"And when do you propose appearing on the scene with your assistants?"

"At once. To-day. I will report within two hours after I know that you are safely at home, and Chick and Patsy will be there before night. And now, as there are other passengers coming on the deck, I'll leave you. Please do not speak to me or notice me again, no matter what happens. When I appear at the Fells, you can call me by the name of the old butler—Simmons; will that do?"

"Very nicely, indeed. There is only one question I can think of which I would like to ask you, and that is, when shall I have the pleasure of seeing you in person?"

"Before very long," replied Nick, as he turned away.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE HOUSE AT LINDEN FELLS.

An entire week had passed since the arrival of the steamer which brought the Dantons home to America, and during that time not a single sign of Paul Rogers or his following had been made manifest.

Nick Carter's watchfulness did not, however, abate in the slightest degree, for he reasoned that the conspirators were merely biding their time, and he smiled to himself also, when he recalled the conversation he had held with Red Morgan in which that worthy had informed him of the numerous oaths against his life.

"If any of the gang are looking for me, it must puzzle them to guess where I have gone," he mused. "It never occurred to me that in coming here and play-

ing the part of butler, I was, in effect, killing two birds with one stone—getting out of their way on the one hand, and getting in their way on the other."

For Nick had been the "butler" at Linden Fells an entire week. Chick had in the meantime filled the post of valet to the old man, for whom, as Mercedes had predicted, he never once had a service to perform. The old man thoroughly despised valets, and would not have one near him. He argued that his wife and daughter merely required the services of an extra person in the house and that they chose to hire that person under the name and guise of a valet for him—which, as a matter of fact, was not far wrong.

Patsy filled the rôle of extra stable boy during this interim—and Patsy enjoyed it.

"Sure," he said, "there's nothin' I'd ruther do on earth than shake hands wid a hoorse!" and it was true. He loved all horses and preferred their society to men.

During the week there had been moments when Nick had found opportunity of exchanging a few words with Mercedes Danton, but for the most part she had held herself entirely aloof, and had treated him exactly as his ostensible position demanded that he should be treated.

Indeed, Nick had insisted on that point, and he often smiled to himself at the literal manner in which she had taken him at his word.

During the week, also, Reginald had returned; but he was rarely at home, and he took no more notice of the new butler than he would have taken of a post, had it been stationed in the front hallway of the house—probably not as much, for the post would have been out of place there while a butler was a part and parcel of the furniture.

It was plainly to be seen, however, that Mercedes did not like the situation at all. She had shown no outward feeling about it at all at first, but as time went on and finally lengthened into a week, she became restless under the conditions, and, at last, on the day which completed the week's stay for the detective, she found an opportunity to send her mother out on a solitary drive in the victoria, and then, when she was sure that there would be no interruptions, she called Nick into the library.

"Don't you think, Mr. Carter, that this has gone far enough?" she asked, somewhat coldly.

"That what has gone far enough?" replied Nick.

"This masquerade."

"No; to be perfectly truthful, I do not."

"It is becoming intolerable to me."

"Why?"

"Do you think I can explain to you why? In fact, need I explain to you, why? Don't you know why as well as I do."

"I think I can understand how you feel about it—yes."

"Well, it must cease. You must go away."

"Pardon me, Miss Danton; I must stay."

"Against my wishes?"

"Certainly not; but with your approval. If, when I came here to act as your butler, I could have foretold the exact time when your enemies were to make a move, there would not have arisen the necessity for me to play the part I have taken at all. I could simply have appeared here, hidden myself in a closet until the villains announced themselves, as they do in plays, met them in front of the footlights, so to speak, and choked them into submission to the applause of the galleries. Unfortunately, this is not a play."

"It seems strangely like a farce to me."

"God grant it may not prove to be a tragedy."

"I wish you would not take things so funereally, Mr. Carter," she said, with some show of petulance.

"How can I take it otherwise when I know the seriousness of the situation?"

"But do you know it? Is it not rather due to your imagination and to your—your—what shall I say?"

"Say what you started to say and did not wish to complete."

"One would suppose you could tell what that was."

"I could. You were about to add, in effect, that I was overzealous in your behalf. Perhaps I am. I do know that danger threatens you, and I do know that there is no place in the world where I can meet and turn aside that danger, as here on the ground where it is sure to fall sooner or later."

"But this condition is likely to go on for weeks."

"In that case we must wait weeks."

"No," she said. "It must cease. Listen, Mr. Carter; have you not told me that my brother is also in peril? In peril that is really as great as mine?"

"Yes; he is in peril, but it is not as great as yours, because nothing that could happen to him would be as serious as if it should happen to you. In conditions of this kind, we can only go by contrasts."

"But you leave him entirely unguarded while you devote all your time to watching over me."

"Pardon me. We are watching over your mother, your father, your home and your surroundings. Neither is your brother neglected. He comes home usually during the small hours of the morning and goes away again about midday, but there is never a moment when he could run into danger without my knowledge—unless it happened to be inside one of his own clubhouses where my shadows cannot follow him."

"But this espionage seems to me to be something dreadful. The truth is, if you will have it, Mr. Carter, that I cannot bear the thought that you are here in this house acting as a servant. I do not mind the presence of your assistant, or of Patsy, in the stable; but——"

"But you want me to get out."

"You put the statement in rather a brutal manner, but in plain English I suppose that to be precisely what I do want," she replied. "Of course, I know that you understand exactly what I mean by that statement, so what is the use of softening it?"

"None whatever; and you could not say words which would delight me more—just at this present moment and crisis."

"Please go away, Mr. Carter. If this espionage must be continued, send another of your assistants."

Nick thought deeply for a moment, and then, smiling at her, said:

"Very well. I can send you a man who is almost as old as the one who went away to make room for me, but he is perfectly reliable. I will give you a letter which you will hand to Chick. You shall send him into the city this afternoon, and he in turn will send out the man who is to take my place. Will that do?"

"Admirably," and Mercedes smiled brightly. Then impulsively she took a step forward and put out her hand. "Please do not misunderstand me," she began, but he stopped her.

"I understand you perfectly," he said. "I realize now that I should have sent an assistant in the first place instead of coming myself; but you——"

"Please say no more now," she interrupted. "You cannot know how terrible it seems to me to be on terms of intimacy with my butler."

"It is, perhaps, a good lesson in sociology," said Nick. Then he seated himself at the library table and wrote rapidly, his instructions to Chick. That done, he sealed the note and gave it to her.

"You will notice that I have sealed the message I have written," he said. "That is done because I am a butler, and do not know any better; not because I fear that you may read the contents of my letter. The mere sealing of the note is a part of the masquerade;" and he laughed in a low tone.

"Is that necessary, in writing to your assistant?" she asked.

"Quite," he said. "And now, if you will give that to Chick and then return here, I have two or three more questions I would like to ask you. Remember that in two hours my substitute will be here, and that thereafter I will have no further opportunity for consultation with you."

The note which Mercedes delivered to Chick, and which took him at once into the city, directed him simply to go there and make himself up according to directions given, and then to return and take Nick's place as butler, and it explained that Nick himself would, after he was relieved from duty as butler, assume the disguise that Chick had worn and return in his place as valet. So the reader will see that Nick Carter had no intention of leaving the house at all, but determined merely to change places with Chick.

When Mercedes returned to the room where Nick was awaiting her, he pointed to a chair, and then, with slow emphasis, he said:

"Miss Danton, there is a question which I have long wished to ask you and which will seem impertinent.

...rtheless, I assure you that it is important that ...hould answer it, because since I have been familiar ... the incidents connected with this family, many ...gs not on the surface have come to my notice."

"What is the question, Mr. Carter?"

"It is a question which I might ask of your brother, r father or mother, if I chose to ask it in another way; ut I have thought best to ask it of you, because I ink, in your heart, you, of all the family, will best derstand my motives."

"I will understand at least, that you deal without pertinence or idle curiosity, even if your question hould appear so," she replied, in a low tone. "I think understand your motives, Mr. Carter, and if, in send- ig you away I have seemed to lack appreciation of hem, I assure you that I have not——"

"Hush! I too, understand. Now listen, for this is the uestion. Since our acquaintance began, I have taken ccasion to look up, rather carefully, the history of our immediate family, and I find that you had an lder brother, six years older than Reginald, to whose memory a small monument has been erected in Wood- awn. That monument was placed there when you were ten years old. The question itself is this: Have ou any reason to believe that the brother, to whose memory that monument was raised, is still alive?"

CHAPTER VIII.

PAUL ROGERS' BLOW FOR MILLIONS.

For a moment after the detective asked the question, Mercedes stared in open-eyed amazement into his face. Then she slowly lowered her eyes until their gaze had settled upon a figure in the carpet, and she replied with the one word:

"Yes."

She did not ask why he had put the question. She waited for the next one which she seemed to know would follow upon the first.

"How long have you known that he was not dead?" asked Nick.

"Always," she replied, still with her eyes lowered. "At least, I knew almost at once that the report was untrue. As young as I was—only ten—he trusted me to keep his secret. He sent me a long letter in which he told me all his dreadful history—and sorrow—and, oh, I cannot talk about it. Later, I saw him."

"Three years later—when you were thirteen—you awoke in the night and saw him at your bedside, did you not?" asked Nick, gently.

She raised her eyes then, half frightened.

"Are you a wizard?" she asked. "I have never told of that circumstance to anybody—not even to Sarah Kearney, my maid, who was my confidente in the other part of it, and whom I swore to secrecy on the most solemn oath I could devise."

"Sarah has not broken her oath to you. She has told me nothing."

Mercedes clasped her hands together and gazed imploringly into the detective's face.

"Then you have seen my brother, Tom," she said slowly, and with conviction that could not be shaken. "My brother, Tom, who was my idol—whom I worshiped. You have seen him. Nobody else could have told you what only he and I know."

"Yes, Mercedes——"

"Hush! You must not call me that, now; not yet."

"I have seen your brother, Tom, and he told me about it—and yet he does not suspect that I know that you are his sister."

"He is well? And happy? And—good?" she asked, breathlessly, and in a tone which seemed to demand that the answers to her questions should be in the affirmative. And Nick replied in a gentle tone:

"Yes, he is well. I do not think he is quite happy; how could he be so, away from the sister he loves so dearly? And—he is trying to be good, I think."

"Where is he?" she asked, and Nick smiled kindly as he replied:

"You are asking questions of me instead of permitting me to ask some that are important, but I think I may promise you that he is not far away—that he is watching over your safety at this moment in a manner and under advantages which I could not obtain, how-

ever hard I might try—and that he is not very far away from you."

"Then he is—free?" she exclaimed, with a glad cry.

"Free! Yes. Why do you ask that?"

"Because I was told—oh, kind Heaven, must I confess it?—that he was a prisoner for life in a French prison. A prisoner for life! Think of it."

"Ah!" said Nick. "Now I think I understand. Now I think it will not be necessary to ask you any more of these harrowing questions. Now, I think I know all the truth."

"Please tell me what you mean," murmured Mercedes.

"Some time ago," replied Nick, speaking slowly, "I had a long talk with your maid, Sarah. From her talk I gathered that when Paul Rogers appeared here in this house as valet to your brother, Reginald, you discovered that he was not a stranger to you. I also discovered that there was a secret connected with your knowing him, which she would not under any circumstances reveal, not even to save your life. When Ramon Orizaba was murdered by Paul Rogers, it was only the horror of the thing which affected you—there was no sorrow in your soul. You believed yourself well rid of both of them, and yet you were startled lest you could no longer supposedly communicate with your brother, Tom.

"Wait, Mercedes; let me finish. I know that while you have been abroad, you have caused every prison in France and England to be searched, as well as it could be done by others, for traces of somebody. I know that you constantly supplied Orizaba with money, and that even now, in a roundabout way, you are supplying an emissary of Paul Rogers—in short, that you are furnishing the very funds with which he is bribing others to murder your father, mother and your brother, Reginald, as well as your own self. You do not know that; but I do. You think that he is sending a large part of that money abroad to make easier the prison life of your brother, Tom, and you have so great an amount of money at your command that ten thousand dollars, or even a hundred thousand, is as a drop in a bucket against the purchase of added comforts for him.

Her head was bowed in her hands now, but she was not weeping.

"Do you remember your horror, Mercedes, when you believed, for a time, that Reginald was the murderer of Orizaba? Do you remember how grateful you were when it was proved to you that he could not have done the deed? And that even after it was proved to you, you still felt gratitude toward Rogers, because he left behind him a letter in which he confessed that he did the deed himself? And do you not see the cold calculation and planning of the fiend through it all? He thought at first that he would convince you that Reginald killed Orizaba. Later, he became afraid that his plans in that direction would not work, and so he made a play to obtain your eternal gratitude by confessing that he did it himself, and thus saving Reginald."

"And if your own clear reasoning had not convinced me of the real truth, I might still have reason, in my thoughts, for eternal gratitude to him," murmured Mercedes.

"Exactly. But, the cupidity of Rogers grows with his attainments. Having placed himself in a position where he could command almost any sum from you at any moment, he became dissatisfied with that, and wanted the principal—and, remember this: But for your brother, Tom, who has never been inside a French prison nor in France, so far as I know, and who came to me with a warning of the plot against you, Rogers would have been in a fair way to accomplish every hellish thing he set out to do. Tell me, now, how you first knew Rogers."

"When I was at school in France he came to me with a message from my brother."

"Forged," said Nick.

"Perhaps so; I believed it to be real. He told me that he had been friends with Tom, and—oh, I cannot repeat it all."

"It is not necessary. I desire only the main facts."

"I could not command so much money then, because I was only a child, but I found a way to obtain a good deal."

"And that you gave to him for your brother, Tom."

"Yes; all of it. There has never been a month since that time when I have been free from the demands of Paul Rogers; but I have not resented that as long as I believed I was benefiting my wayward brother. I have always supposed that a part of what I supplied went to him."

"Nothing has gone to him. Did not Rogers also endeavor to force himself upon your attentions?"

"Yes; to my shame, he did."

"To your shame? Oh, no; but to your misfortune and your youth—yes."

"He is well educated. He represented himself to be of good family——"

"Which I have no doubt he is. Go on."

"But I stopped all that. I threatened even to desert my brother—which, of course, I did not really intend to do—unless he ceased his attentions. Then Orizaba came upon the scene. I met him before my mother did. It was I to whom the proofs of his relationship were first exhibited. He also had been a friend of Tom's—at least, so it was said. And—need we go farther into that subject?"

"No. I am very glad that we have cleared the atmosphere of things, by this talk."

"And I am glad, too. More so than you can understand. It seems to me right, now, that you should share my secret, although an hour ago, before you spoke to me on the subject, I would sooner have died than have shared it with you."

"Has your father or your mother any idea that your brother, Tom, is alive?"

"No. At least, father has none. Sometimes I have thought that my mother is not convinced of his death—and yet, I am sure that she is not convinced that he lives."

"And Reginald?"

"Reginald believes that Tom is dead, of course. You must know, Mr. Carter, that Tom was my childhood's idol. He was a saint—a god—a big brother, who was brave and fearless."

"I understand."

"Can you tell me no more about him?" she asked, pleadingly.

"At present there is no more to tell. I know nothing more than I have told you. He did not tell me that he was your brother, nor was I sure that he was so until I questioned you just now."

"And, later? Do you think you will see him again?"

"I am sure that I will see him again, and I think I may promise you that some time in the near future, if you will be guided by me, I will bring you together."

"Oh, thank God!"

An hour later, Chick reappeared on the scene, wearing the disguise which Nick had directed, and was duly installed as butler in Nick's place. At the same time, Nick took his departure, but only for the purpose of traveling the short distance that was necessary to find a place to make himself into a counterpart of what Chick had been while he was serving in the capacity of valet.

And so their positions were reversed.

Both remained in the house, and the only real alterations in their plans of watching, existed in the fact that Mercedes believed that the detective himself had returned to New York and that she had now to do only with his assistants.

As the afternoon waned, Mercedes became anxious about the extended absence of her mother who, it will be remembered, had gone alone for a ride in the victoria; and now fully three hours had elapsed since her departure. It was unprecedented for her to remain out so long alone.

As Mercedes came out upon the porch for the purpose of directing that somebody from the stable ride down the road in search of the carriage, four men, followed by several others, appeared in the gateway. They were carrying a litter between them, and upon it was stretched the silent and motionless figure of Mercedes' mother; and Nick Carter, who, as the valet, started at once down the path to meet them, muttered to himself:

"Paul Rogers' first blow for the Danton millions has fallen."

CHAPTER IX.

ONE MAN AGAINST SIXTY-FIVE.

The mother of Mercedes was not dead, and the story told of the accident, which had befallen her, was so direct and clear that it seemed to have happened quite naturally.

It was, in short, nothing more than a repetition of numberless other accidents of the kind. The horses had been restless from the start, and the coachman had found it difficult to manage them. One of them in particular had acted as if "possessed of the devil" from the very moment when they left the stable.

The drive had been a longer one than usual, by the mistress' direction, and they had started on their return when a strange figure had sprung up in the road directly in front of them.

The horses shied and turned short around, overturning the victoria and throwing Mrs. Danton out on the hard road. She sustained a fracture of one arm and a blow on her head had deprived her of consciousness. She was still unconscious when she was carried into the house, and, although the doctors resorted to every expedient they could summon to their aid, she showed no signs of coming out of the coma into which the shock of the accident and the blow on her head, had thrown her.

As soon as the first effects of the arrival of the litter were over, Nick hurried to the stable, and, notwithstanding the objections of the hostler and his assistants, began a hurried examination of the harness.

"Horses don't act restless like these did, unless there is some reason for it," he said to the head stableman. "I was a coachman once myself, before I became a valet. Look there."

He was holding the backband in his hands, and he pointed to a steel burr that had been screwed into the band in such a position that short but sharp steel needles would pierce the delicate skin of the animal that wore the harness.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded.

The hostler was dumfounded and could make no reply. It was plain to Nick, at once, that he was not responsible for its presence there.

Another burr of the same kind was found in the remaining harness, but there was not one among the employees of the stable who could throw any light whatever upon the mystery of how they came there. Even Patsy, when he was taken aside by the detective, assured his chief that he had not relaxed his vigilance for a moment and that he had done everything he could think of or that ingenuity could suggest to be in a position to know of any planning or plotting that might be going on there. He was certain that the burrs had been introduced into the harnesses by some person who had managed to creep into the stable unobserved, and who had also been successful in getting away undiscovered after he had done his work.

To Chick, when the opportunity came, Nick said:

"I think now that we may look for rapid developments. The plotters have commenced the campaign, and it is more than likely that they will seek to rush things from this out. It is not improbable that they may think I am out of the city and that, therefore, it is a good time to strike."

Developments did come along rapidly after that.

As soon as Mrs. Danton had been properly cared for, and her husband and son notified, Mercedes wrote a letter to Nick Carter in which she told him of the "accident," and expressed her regret that she had hastened his departure from the house just at the time when she needed him most; and she closed by saying:

"I know it is too late now to ask you to return and resume the conditions just as they existed before I sent you away, but I may express the hope that you will be near us, for I find that in your absence I have not half the boasted courage I have credited myself with."

Reginald and his father each arrived at the Fells as soon as possible after they were informed of the accident.

Darkness had fallen by the time the household had settled down to routine affairs.

Two nurses, hastily summoned from the city, were in attendance upon the mistress of the Fells; old Peter the master, had sought his study, as he called it, a small

in[illegible]om which he had caused to be fitted for his sole use [illegible]d which contained merely a desk, his chair and a [illegible]ble and bookcase. Beside him was his inevitable pot of coffee, which was always near him when he spent an [illegible]ning at home.

Reginald had gone to his own rooms also, and disappeared utterly from view, but it was supposable that he was reading, and that he also had his pot of coffee near him. This pot-of-coffee habit affected father and son alike, and had extended to the servants, for the coffee was the famous Uarapam brand, which, when properly made, is richer and better than wine.

And so it happened that when ten o'clock was striking, Peter Stuyvesant Danton was taking his coffee in his "den"; Reginald was drinking his coffee in his own rooms; Mercedes was sipping coffee with faithful old Sarah, in her boudoir; Chick, now serving in his capacity of butler, was partaking of the same refreshment in the servants' hall, unbending his official dignity for the moment, for the purpose of placing himself in an attitude where he could pick up any gossip about the events of the afternoon that might be floating among the help; coffee was also served among the men at the stable, for it was the inevitable habit for the coachman to appear in the kitchen at the proper moment and to return with a pitcher of the delectable concoction; even the nurses, who were attending upon the still unconscious mistress of the house, were served with a pot of coffee, and sat together in the larger of the two rooms, sipping it and talking in low tones about almost any subject which did not include their patient.

And thus it was that from the roof to the cellar of Linden Fells, every inmate—save one—was drinking coffee at ten o'clock that night.

That one exception happened to be Nick Carter; and it was not because he disliked coffee, or because he harbored any suspicion that the coffee had been doctored, that he did not drink it with the rest, for there was no doubt, that had he been where the "Nectar of Uarapam" could have been offered to him, he would [illegible]ve partaken.

But it so happened that when the house quieted down after the excitements of the afternoon, Nick intuitively smelt mischief in the air.

It was all mere intuition on his part, too, and the only serious treatment he gave it, in addition to his ordinary habit of watchfulness and wakefulness, was to determine that he would take a stroll through the grounds after the others had retired, and that he would keep an especial lookout upon the house from the shrubbery—at least, long enough to satisfy himself that there was no occasion for the exercise of extraordinary vision.

But even Nick Carter could have no idea of the terrible things that were to happen that night. Even he could not be supposed to foresee the plots and plans of so crafty an enemy as Paul Rogers and his gang of sixty or more assistants in villainy.

But back in the city of New York, at about the time when Mrs. Danton was thrown from her carriage, "Red" Tom Morgan, as we know him, was learning for the first time, of events that were to happen—or that were planned to happen that same night.

He was told nothing of the runaway. He was given no information about the plan to worry and frighten the horses, in the belief that even if Mrs. Danton was not severely injured by the accident that was sure to follow, she at least would be sufficiently overcome by the shock and fright of the incident, that the household would be upset.

Of that little fact he was not told, because it was not considered necessary that he should know it; but of another and greater event to happen, he was fully informed and requested to play his part in it.

And this event, so far as his information went, was to the effect that the cook at Linden Fells, whose duty it was to prepare the coffee each evening, had fallen under the influence of a bribe, and had consented to drug the concoction, so deftly and at the same time so thoroughly, that within an hour after the time of drinking it, not one who had swallowed so much as two tablespoonfuls, would be awake or capable of being roused by any ordinary methods.

The hour for the drinking of coffee there was usually ten, or ten-thirty o'clock, and it was, therefore, safe to plan that by the time the midnight hour struck,

the inmates of Linden Fells would be slumbering so soundly that an army marching past would not disturb them.

And—in fact, there would be something closely akin to an army on hand at that time, if comparative estimates may be used as standard.

Sixty-five men, not counting Paul Rogers himself—sixty-five desperate criminals—sixty-five human fiends would, during the hours between ten and twelve, approach Linden Fells from every direction, creeping in upon it silently and stealthily through the darkness, while every member of the household was incapable of resistance because stupefied by the drug that had been introduced into the coffee.

Sixty-five men, whose professions ran the gamut of crime from sneak thievery and pocket picking to bank burglary and conspiracy, were to gather around that mansion in the darkness and await the signal of Paul Rogers for their descent upon it.

As a precaution against interruption from the outside, every wire which connected with the house was to be cut, as Dewey cut the cables at Manila Bay.

At a given signal, a certain detail of these men were to descend upon the stable and the remainder were to attack the house, so that if out of all the inmates there happened to be one person who had not swallowed the drug—or even two—that one or two would have no opportunity to escape and so give the alarm.

And then, the sixty-five were to go through the house and loot it at their pleasure. They were given full liberty, by Paul Rogers, to help themselves to anything of value which they could find and which could be carried away without impediment to their escape.

And when the house had been looted of all that was desired, and when Mercedes Danton had been taken out of the house a captive and hurried away through the darkness to a fate concerning which even Tom Morgan was kept in ignorance, then, after that, gallons upon gallons of kerosene oil were to be scattered throughout the house, the match was to be applied, and old Peter Danton, with his wife and son, and so many of the servants as happened to be there, were to be consumed in the flames.

Thus, it was planned, would all traces of the crime be destroyed.

Thus, by the wholesale murder of the servants as well as their employers, it would not be suspected that the real plan was to put the Dantons out of the world.

Thus it would be easy to explain afterward, how great good fortune had kept Miss Mercedes in the city that night—and thus, when Isabel Benton appeared in her place in the world, any difference of character or appearance might easily be accounted for because of the horrors and the terrible losses through which she had passed.

Thus, the reader will understand, the culmination of Paul Rogers' plotting would be achieved, and while the real Mercedes Danton was quietly put to death, the pseudo Mercedes—Isabel Benton—would appear in her place, in the enjoyment of her fortune and in the exercise of her prerogatives.

All this hellish plan was developed to Tom Morgan—or shall we confess at once what the reader already knows, and say that he was really Tom Danton?—during the late afternoon and early evening of the eventful day upon which it was to happen.

And when he would have started away at once to warn his sister and his brother of the awful peril that hung over their heads, even if he was compelled to acknowledge his identity in order to do so, he was detained. Not because anybody suspected him of showing any interest in the affair other than that terrible interest which they all enjoyed, but because of the careful plans of their leader who had arranged for the conduct of every separate man with the care of a general in ordering a concerted attack upon the enemy.

This and that group of men were to start for the rendezvous at stipulated times, and they were to meet at specified points so that there could be no miscarriage of plans—and Tom Danton's orders offered him no opportunity of starting out until nine o'clock.

Fortunately, however, he was to go alone, and he planned that at least he could get his sister and his parents out of the house before it was attacked.

But, oh, the long hours of waiting until the time for

ing is start for the scene of the crime came around. But when he did start, there was no delay in his going.

And up at the Fells, one man sat in a rustic seat under a lattice where he was in deep shadow, waiting and watching for he knew not what.

That one man was Nick Carter, who knew nothing of the plot, or of the drug, which was at that moment being prepared for those who were in the house.

And Nick Carter, with only Burglar Tom Morgan for his aid, was to face all that crew of sixty-five human devils, upon murder and rapine bent.

CHAPTER X.

PAUL ROGERS' LAST STRUGGLE.

Eleven o'clock had just tolled from the tower of the town hall in the village, three miles away, when Nick Carter saw a shadow cross the path near to the spot where he was sitting, and he started to his feet and bounded forward with the suddenness of the leap of a panther.

He seized the man from behind and forced him to the earth, at the same moment attempting to grasp his throat, thus to shut off all chance of his calling out and thus summoning assistance; but in the darkness he missed the man's throat, and was amazed to hear the well-recognized tones of Tom Morgan's voice cursing in a low tone, while he struggled to free himself from the grasp of his assailant.

Instantly the detective altered his tactics.

"Red Morgan! Tom! Tom Morgan!" he whispered in his ear. "Stop struggling. Lie quiet. Listen to me. I am Nick Carter."

"Praise God!" breathed Tom, in reply. And then in a whisper that was still lower, he continued:

"Don't make a sound, for Heaven's sake. There are sixty-five crooks around us somewhere. If they are not here now they are on the way and not far distant. As many as a score of them must be hidden near here now, although I do not think they will approach near the house before midnight."

Then, as rapidly as possible, he revealed the awful condition of things to the detective, covering only the main points of the plot, for there was not time to go into detail; but he closed with this statement:

"The telephone wires were to be cut at eleven-thirty, and the electric light wires at midnight. At a quarter past twelve, the descent is to be made on the house."

"Well, man alive, that gives us an hour and a quarter to work," said Nick. "We can do a lot in that time."

"But there will not be a moment between now and then when the eyes of the gang will not be fixed upon the house, and, if they should discover us——"

"Come with me," was the only reply which Nick Carter made, and he glided away through the darkness.

The detective had provided himself with a key to the side door, and with that he admitted himself and his companion to the Fells mansion.

The hall was brilliantly lighted, and Nick directed that Tom turn off each light as he approached it.

"We must work swiftly and carefully," he said. "And Tom, let us start right. It will not be a waste of time to say this much to you. I know you. You are Tom Danton, supposed by all your family, save your sister, to be dead. Hush! I have talked with her about you. She loves her big brother now with the same devotion she gave to him when she was a girl. She only wants you to be good, that is all. To-night do your mightiest, Tom, in working for her, and for your father, and mother, and brother. Your mother was injured this afternoon. She is ill unto death. She may not recover. She and Mercedes must be saved first. After them, your father, who is an old man. You must take your sister to a place of safety. I will take your mother. After that you rescue your father, and after them we will get the others out as fast as we can. Now talk quickly. You were born here. You lived here all through your boyhood. There must be a place where we can take them—some place where, as a boy, you played Indian scout, where these fiends will not find them until we have rescued everybody from the house. Think it up while I make use of this telephone before the fiends cut the wire."

He seized the receiver and placed it to his ear. The instant he got a reply, he said:

"Quick, Central. There may not be a moment to talk. This is Linden Fells. The house is besieged—is to be burned to the ground. Tell the police; summon assistance——"

He heard a sharp stroke against the wire as if it had been struck with a hammer, and the connection was cut off. He had no means of knowing whether central had understood him or not, and he knew that he must work on the supposition that no help would come.

"Well?" he demanded, turning to Tom. "Have you thought of a place?"

"Yes. I know the very place. If we only have time and are not seen, we can save them all. Can you carry my mother, Mr. Carter? She is very heavy."

"I could carry a horse with her on its back," replied Nick. "Get Mercedes and meet me at this door."

"No," replied Tom. "We go out through the cellar. It is a secret way which I built as a boy. My father had it walled up with masonry, but I know where there is a crowbar, and I can tear the wall away in two minutes."

"Good," said Nick. "Get Mercedes and meet me in the cellar, then."

When the detective entered the room where the injured woman had been taken, he saw at a glance that consciousness had returned to her while her attendants were wrapped in the influence of the drug, and that, although very weak and faint with fright because of her unavailing efforts to rouse the nurses, she was still thoroughly conscious, and instantly Nick determined that the best way to deal with her was to tell her as much of the truth as he dared.

Rapidly he explained to her who he was; that the accident which resulted in her injury was part and parcel with a plot to burn and rob Linden Fells; that in carrying out the plot, every member of the household had been drugged into unconsciousness save herself, and that she had been spared only because she was not able to swallow the coffee; that the house was at that minute surrounded by their enemies, and that the only way of escape was to submit to being carried away from the place; and then, without more ado, he took her in his arms and started for the cellarway.

At the bottom of the stairs he encountered Tom, who held Mercedes in his arms. She was in a stupor, and so utterly unconscious of the events that were taking place around her.

In the cellar it was the work of a moment for Tom to find the old and now rust-eaten crowbar where he had hidden it years before, and with it to knock a hole through the wall where his father had caused the lad's "secret passage" to be stopped up. But this was a time when the foolish prank of a boy was destined to stand the man in good stead—to be, in fact, the means of saving many lives.

Ah! the enthusiasm of youth! The labor of many weeks bestowed upon that "secret passage" by the boy Tom Danton, was bearing fruit this moment.

The passage led straight underneath the rose garden to the edge of the bluff which overlooked a deep ravine and at the end opened into a log hut, which had now fallen into decay, but which, because it was almost inaccessible because of the steep sides of the ravine around it, had been forgotten by those who lived on the estate.

It was with relief that Nick discovered when they arrived at the hut, that Mrs. Danton had quietly fainted away, and, depositing her on the ground beside her daughter, both men hurried back again through the passage to the mansion.

"Your father next," ordered Nick, "and, after that whomever you please. Only work fast. Leave me to work as I please. We can get them all out, even to the last servant, if only our—or, rather, your strength holds out."

"I am as strong as a bull," replied Tom, hastening away. But he paused long enough to call back to the detective:

"We must not forget the stable when we have finished with the house."

Nick nodded and proceeded with the work.

The drugged and unconscious men and women whom they carried away, hung like corpses upon their arms. Nothing roused them, and soon the small log cabin in the ravine was filled with the slumbering throng. And still all was silent without the house.

Once Nick took time to look at his watch, but it

until he was carrying out the last of the people he had saved, and he saw that the time then lacked only two minutes of the time set for the attack.

Chick, in his character as butler, was the very last whom Nick carried away, and Chick manifested some signs of reviving. But, although he opened his eyes and glanced vacantly around him for an instant, he closed them again and sank back into unconsciousness.

The house was clear of living occupants at last. Not so, however, with the stable.

"Tom," he said, "are you a good shot?"

"I can drive a nail at thirty paces," replied Tom.

"Have you got a gun with you?"

"Two."

"Good. It is up to us to defend the house now, and save it from fire till assistance arrives if such a thing is possible. Those whom we have carried out will be safe where they are for the present—at least, as safe as we can make them. The electric lights have gone out, showing that the enemy has cut the wires. There is a fairly good starlight outside, and we ought to be able to pick off a few of the attackers before they can get into the house, don't you think so?"

"All I ask is to get a bead on Rogers himself," replied Tom, grimly.

"Good. Kill him if you can. You are justified. He and his men will probably approach in a body. I have four revolvers here; two in my sleeves and two in my pockets. You have two, and that gives us thirty shots all told. We should give a fairly good account of ourselves, I think. You take the front of the house and I will take the rear. I want to be where I can cover the stable as well as the house."

Nick had guessed the intentions of the man, Rogers, almost exactly. His followers did not, however, attack in one body, but in three.

There were a score or more of the men in each bunch, and one of these advanced toward the front of the house, another toward the rear, and the third approached the stable. Nick thus had a perfect view of some three of the criminals.

He had opened wide the door where he was standing so that he could see to shoot without obstruction, and he stood so that he could, if necessary, kick the door shut at any moment.

The gang which attacked the stable, reached their destination first, and as the leader reached out one hand to raise the latch of the door, one of the detective's revolvers spoke, and the man dropped in his tracks as if he had been hit with a club.

Then, with one hand, Nick played upon the men at the stable door, and with the other upon the men who were approaching the door where he was standing, and the reports of his shots sounded with the regularity and precision of the ticking of a watch as he fired.

There was a yell of rage at the first fire, and other yells at the second, third, fourth, and others.

Men dropped to the ground with howls of rage and pain, and writhed in agony, for the detective was aiming his shots at their legs and not at their hearts. He had no desire to kill, save where it concerned one man, and he could not see Rogers anywhere among those at his side of the house.

Within the space of ten seconds from the instant he fired the first shot, the attacking party broke and fled; but even as they did so, there were loud shouts behind them.

Lights flashed upon every side. There came the sound of galloping horses, the screech of a steam fire-engine, and the encouraging cries of a throng of rescuers who had started out from the village upon the summons of the girl at the central office of the telephone who had given the alarm.

Not one of the sixty-five marauders succeeded in entering either the house or the stable, and only five of them succeeded in escaping.

It seemed to Nick as if the entire village had turned out and hastened to the rescue, as, indeed, it, had, and as they had arrived on the scene at the very moment when Nick and Tom began firing, the attention of the attacking party had been distracted from their enemies in the rear until they were entirely surrounded, and there was left to them no chance of escape.

Thirty of the marauders were wounded, although none of them were seriously injured.

Only one was killed outright, and he laid upon his face in front of the porch, with a bullet hole squarely between his eyes.

And what of Tom Danton?

He was also wounded.

A bullet had somehow found its way to him and had entered his side, but a quick examination satisfied Nick that the wound was not mortal.

"I got Rogers with my first bullet," he whispered to Nick, as the detective bent over him; "and he got me, too. But he won't bother us any more. Send me to a hospital, Carter, if you please, and don't tell the folks who I am. I'm going to live a new life from this day forth, and try to be worthy of the sister who loves me."

* * * * * * *

It was a remarkable fact of that raid upon Linden Fells, that each and every victim of the drug that was administered in the coffee, awoke in his or her bed or room, exactly where they had dropped asleep, and that the only person among them all, who was at all conscious of what had happened, was Chick, and he only in a vague way, which was utterly uncertain until the detective explained it to him.

Nick sent the prisoners and the wounded men away with the rescuing party, and removed, as far as possible, all traces of the fight.

Even the old man, Mr. Danton, was seated in his chair beside his table when he awoke, in just the position in which he had fallen asleep from the effects of the drug. Even the servants were restored to the attitudes in which they had been discovered by Nick and Tom, and awoke in the small hours of the morning to slink away to their beds in chagrin.

Not one of them knew what had happened while they were sleeping—and not one of them learned the facts until later, when, of course, it became public property and was generally talked about—and even then, there were those who regarded it as a hoax and refused to believe.

Nick Carter did not send Tom Danton to a hospital. He had him conveyed to his own house, and, having left him there under the very best care that could be provided, he returned to Linden Fells.

But before he departed, he said to Tom:

"We are rid of Rogers, Tom; but we have an implacable enemy left still."

"You mean Isabel?" asked Tom.

"Yes. Isabel Benton. Mark my words, she will yet be heard from.

But during the days which followed, there came no sign of Isabel Benton, nevertheless.

* * * * * * *

Not until the afternoon of the day following the fight, did Nick Carter take Mercedes into his confidence and tell her all that had happened. He had imposed silence upon the mother, who was the only one in the house who had not partaken of the drug. It remained only necessary for him to tell all to Mercedes.

And he did.

I will leave the reader to imagine how he told it. How he dwelt on the heroism of Tom Danton, whom he promised should see her and talk with her as soon as he could be made to consent to do so.

But here ends the story of Paul Rogers' conspiracy for millions.

THE END.

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